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The Greek Tragedy *Christus Patiens*, the *Mare Liberum* of Hugo Grotius, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Regained*: Tracing a Philosophical Line through Dramaturgy and Religious Narration

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INTRODUCTION

First, to help locate my study in the history of philosophy, company and international law, religion, poetry and nationalism, I will very briefly introduce the three texts in question. Brief, as the sheer volume and multiple intricacies of these works could become a major hamper. In this light the secondary literature, commentaries and analyses are so extensive – I have hardly touched them.

The *Christus Patiens*

This is a largely unknown Greek Tragedy by an unknown author but traditionally ascribed to the Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus from the 4th century. The general attitude is that it was written in the 12th century. One of the critiques against the drama is that it is of less value because it is badly written, even as others praise it for its elegance, and being well written.

The Tragedy consists of three parts and tells of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus from the perspective of his mother. It was certainly intended to be read and not performed. The tragedy is written according to the style of Euripides, uses much material, for example, from the *Bacchante*, and follows Aristotelian theory quite closely. It's contemplation and theology is Neoplatonic and its language is classical and of a higher register. My one theory is that Mary, the Mother of God (Theotokos), is a characterisation of the fourth-fifth century Neoplatonist Hypatia of Alexandria. The connection with Gregory of Nazianzus is double. First in the dubious ascription, this was most certainly added as a title at a later date by an editor or scribe, and second in its theology, which resounds that of Gregory. We need to remember that Gregory was a Neoplatonist, and also was strongly influenced by Origen, a student of Ammonius Saccas, and fellow student of Plotinus. To a large degree this places the Greek Tragedy reflecting on theological truths using philosophical language in a category close to Philo of Alexandria, who wrote on political issues, using philosophical structures, set in the history of the Jewish religion and people. Plato too, used the conventions from drama to cast his philosophical debates.

To help focus my study in the *Christus Patiens* I am concentrating on a speech that is reported to have been given by “some angel or mortal” to the Teacher's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, directly after the betrayal, in which Judas is offered absolution. To many this may sound normal, but a few alarm bells ring. I will note one such bell below.

What has this to do with commercial and international law, diplomatic and nationalistic rhetoric of the 16th and 17th century? And why bother with this once possibly over-rated piece of writing? The play was “critically” edited and its text published in 1542 by A. Bladus. In 1608 Hugo Grotius published his Latin translation of the *Christus Patiens*. In 1609 Hugo Grotius published his *Mare Liberum*, or “Freedom of the Sea”, which many see as a

foundational work in Mercantile Law and International Rights. The Latin translation of *Christus Patiens* by the diplomat and Greek philosophy orientated Hugo Grotius inspired the English poet, nationalist and “modern-philosophy” orientated John Milton in writing his epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in the mid 17th century. There are also traces of the *Mare Liberum* in *Paradise Lost*, which I must still account for.

The Mare Liberum

The *Mare Liberum* of Hugo Grotius is better known today than the *Christus Patiens*. As we all know, it was written to help settle arguments between international shipping companies on the freedom of the sea, and that everyone has a *right* to the open waters. Its dependence on Plato, especially the *Gorgias*, is quite striking. While we are concentrating on this work for its philosophical contemplation, as an early work in the Grotius repertoire, it needs to be set in relation to his religious writings, his own attempts at writing Greek tragedies on Religious themes, and his other philosophical works. A particular criticism that has been levelled against Grotius is his apparent naivety. He lived in an era when *religious truths* were exposed with hostility even as – in the so-called modern era – religious persecutions and theological battles were rife. A question I am trying to formulate is whether the naivety of Grotius, for indeed he seems to accept certain *truths* uncritically, is whether he has not shrouded in this piety, similar to what we see in the hymns of the Neoplatonist and Bishop Synesius of Cyrene (5th century), a deeper philosophical understanding of the relation between politics, religion, law and society. This I do not see in John Milton, of whom I am becoming more critical, even as I find his poetry masterful. Two examples of texts from the *Mare Liberum* I am looking at are first its introduction, addressed “to the rulers and to the free and independent nations of Christendom” for “its Gorgian piety”, and second, an extract from Chapter 3, which may be relevant for today as it deals with the justification of war in relation to free trade.

Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained

In *Paradise Lost*, written to “justify the ways of God to man”, Satan who planned a revolt and failed waging a war against the Divine, sets about tempting Adam and Eve. Adam agrees out of care for Eve to be tempted. The result is that they are driven from paradise. In *Paradise Regained*, the main focus is on the temptation of Christ, where Satan attempts to corrupt him. The text may then be open to a more *materialist analysis*.

Where the philosophical value of these two exhaustive works might be questioned, they demonstrate a deeper contemplation, which leads to a self-doubt, does this reflection surpass the author’s nationalist sentiments, religious intolerance, and noted rejection of Greek Philosophy as primitive, Descartes and Hobbes as wrong, and fervour for his own self-styled *Monomism*. I say self-styled, because in this he propagated the notion that a single material substance is “animate, self-active, and free”, of which he defined the boundaries.

There are a few additional themes that connect these three subjects, such as the use of biblical and philosophical material, their dramatic characterisations and engagement in the universalism-individualism debate, but for the purposes of this seminar, to keep you all from slumbering too deeply, I will keep it to the chosen line of inquiry.

CONTEXT OF PROJECT

Before formulating my hypothesis, I would like to mention a few more relevant names from this era – the 16th - 17th century: firstly, the Jewish-Dutch philosopher Spinoza; secondly, Robert Belarmine, the Jesuit priest, who incidentally taught in the famous faculty at Leuven, was a strong intellectual proponent against Protestantism, and commented on the authorship of the *Christus Patiens*; thirdly Voltaire, who offers us a link to the 18th and 19th century contemplations on the relations between society, theology, politics, class, theatre and

narrative, especially through his contact with Milton's younger generation during his sojourn in England, for example, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope; and lastly mention can be made of Johan Winckelmann, whose attitude towards art, in my view, placed a damper on the appreciation of philosophical expression through any means but the monotone essay.

Hypothesis

The freedom Judas was given to *choose* his fate according to the Religious Greek Tragedy, written in Neoplatonic language by an unknown author, had an influence (direct or indirect) on the diplomatic philosopher Hugo Grotius in his formulation of the Platonically inspired freedom for maritime companies to *act in self-interest, but questions their right to engage in warfare*; and while the Tragedy as a whole inspired John Milton, the rejected freedom that was granted to this Judas, was similarly granted to Satan in his epics, and informed his Monoistic Philosophy, even as the angels were permitted to wage war.

Directly it must be clarified that I do not claim the *Christus Patiens* was the most important or even a prominent source in *Mare Liberum*, or that *Mare Liberum* can be read back extensively in John Milton. This project wishes to show that the *Christus Patiens* has value even though its authorship is contended and it is castigated as being "poorly written".

Relevance

Flowing from this hypothesis, the specific relevance of the study is situated on the one hand in the debate between Pelagius (universal sacrifice – Christ died for all men) and Augustine (Christ died for the elect), and on the other in the debate between Humanists – Classicists – Doctrinalists – and now Secularists of different orientations on the value of religious – secular texts for understanding societal dynamics. On a secondary level these topics relate to the debate or conflict between nationalists and universalists who use these religious discourses for various purposes.

The foundation of grace for all – including Judas who rejects it – in the *Christus Patiens* may be seen as a minor contributor towards the principle of Human Equality, which is seemingly different from Human Rights. To the later Hugo Grotius contributed in the sense of "rights of sovereignty".

And lastly, the *Christus Patiens* represents an intellectual and artistic shift from the "old world" of Greece and Rome to the "new world" of Rome, Berlin and Paris (which incorporated, rejected the old or saw itself as its natural progression).

Questions

To help direct the hypothesis and the study's relevance a few questions may be posed. These questions have helped structure the methodology and the outline of the eventual dissertation. These questions have been asked and answered repeatedly throughout the course of history. Thus, in this sense they are not new. What is new is that they are being asked in a "new situation".

An aesthetic question on the relation between artistic value and appreciation of a philosophic insight may be asked of both *Christus Patiens* and Hugo Grotius. One of the arguments negating the value of the Greek Tragedy in our visage is that it is poorly written. This while some seek common grounds with the highly appreciated Gregory of Nazianzus, and others point out that not all Gregory's writings are of appreciable quality. Here the question of authorship plays a central role, thus giving rise to the need for a Historical-Critical or diachronic perspective.

Hugo Grotius is often accused of being *naïve* in his writings. Here we will be investigating the balance between diplomacy, intellectualism, ignorance, innocence and naivety. The focus on the author here will then be more synchronic, or based on a closer

analysis of the text, though his sources he names and alludes to are receiving attention (esp. Plato, Pliny, Virgil, Aquinas, Boethius, Cicero, Seneca [mentioning his tragedy *Thyestes*], Quintilian, Plutarch, and many more), besides his contemporaries, like the Spanish scholastic Franciscus de Victoria (1480-1546), with whom he “engages”.

These questions are asked against the persistently asked question: Does authorship matter? Would *Paradise Lost* be so grandiose were it written by a commoner; *Mare Liberum* so fundamental did we know the author to be less of a diplomat; the *Christus Patiens* studied more enthusiastically, could its authorship be proven, and were it shorter, and less slow paced?

This brings us to a more general question. Seen in light of the *great* philosophers of recent years, their *important* works that ask deep and penetrating questions on our existence, are *exceptionally well written* – but by the estimates of whom? – Why study “antiquated” religious texts with “weak” philosophical bearing when we live in a secularized society, whose discourses are by far more sophisticated? Is the value of such texts then only literary? This to an extent is a hermeneutic question derived from a Materialist Literary Perspective, where it is asked what the value could be of the “fringe voices”. Thus the driving question behind the project: Is there any value to *Christus Patiens*?

Methodology

By mentioning diachronic and synchronic analysis almost in the same breath as speaking about aesthetics and hermeneutics would normally and surely should raise a few if not more objections. I have made things a bit more complicated than they need be – so to say, created a conundrum that has no simple solution. For this I suggest: An inter-textual study with a historical perspective, as the governing methodological principle. In communicative terms: the texts speak with their pasts, themselves, and with us. How best should we listen to, engage with their voices and images?

ELABORATION

A line of inquiry that might have stimulated more interest is: Could we show the *Mare Liberum*, one of the foundations of “Free Trade”, “International Treaties”, and “the right to defend rights” or “the justification of war” for the interests of profit, is prejudiced? Another direction might have been: To what extent John Milton’s philosophical mind set contaminated by the self-revelling ideals of supremism and the yearning for aristocratic righteousness? Why then focus on a work of dubious-unknown authorship and questioned quality, that has an elementary plot, its subject matter is overtly religious, it is long and repetitive, and should rightly be forgotten? Precisely for these reasons.

This has to do with our educational frameset. The *Christus Patiens* was believed to be of great value because of its supposed authorship. It then “unwittingly” influenced two diverse persons who went onto be considered “foundational studies”. Once it lost its authorial appeal, it was removed from the shelves, so to speak (many of the old universities still have copies). Though, in its texture it shows how the author went to work, worked with his sources and harmonized Greek Natural Religion, Christian Doctrine, Greek Philosophy; Texts from the Greek Tragedies, Passages from the New Testament; Aristotelean Drama Theory, Biblical Characters; and no clear point. It has certain faults, which may at first be seen as a matter of shortcomings, but reveal, *this text must be read differently*.

A key term is Logos. In the *Christus Patiens* we frequently hear of the Logos of God, referring to Jesus, and one would assume is derived theologically from the prologue of the Gospel of John. However, even as the relation between the Logos in the Gospel of John and Greek – Platonic – philosophy is debated, here in the *Christus Patiens* the philosophical significance of Logos is prevalent. This I believe is lost on John Milton who interprets Logos

solely theologically as in indication of Person and not an “epistemological regulator”, so to say, due to his disregard of the platonic thinkers.

The passage on the reported conversion between Jesus and his betrayer is a little complex to explain in five minutes, or I do not have the ability to articulate it properly, but I wish to draw your attention to one alarm bell, telling us this conversation may have a deeper reading.

The messenger reports (l.189-266 – I will not quote everything – from the *Milton Quarterly*) – added here as it may not be all that well known:

“I thought that I myself heard someone speaking
Quietly to himself against the accursed betrayer of our Teacher:
‘The impiety, Wretch, do you not fear God?
Do you not revere the law of mortals
And Adam who sowed the earth-born crop
And the patriarchs of this race?
And, seeming a disciple, you shame your fellow disciples,
Betraying your Master, alas, for money.

....

....

How then will you and these murders face him
Or what just punishment will you not pay
Except before this you will pay a just punishment 220
If you do not wash your hands of the murder,
Hands which, if you wish to understand now
He himself would wash with liquid streams. (*The seas open to all*)

....

....

And the lake of all-consuming fire will receive you. 235 (again in 258)

....

....

Nevertheless, even in these things, not rejecting you,
Somehow he would save you, looking into your heart:
For he would not be able not to be good
But he would not help you if you are unwilling;
For he has not placed a law of force upon mortals 250
Nor is his will tyrannical:
And shamefully broken you will break your evil heart.

.....

(and then a little twist)

....

Listen, Judas to the account of your evils. 260
And yet I will add one more thought
For God will not force you to be wise:
In the choice and decision of mortals
Is his wisdom in all things, always.’
Some angel or mortal, I know not which, said these things,
As I have said them, to the traitor.”

The final word on philosophy rests with God. Or said differently: The God of Philosophy determines everything. Within this added thought the whole speech, as must the

whole Tragedy, must be interpreted *with wisdom* using the critical tools provided by the author. In essence: the law governing human conduct is not determined by Virtue, but out of Vice. I think this is a point that Hugo Grotius picked up, as well as the all-encompassing gift of grace – the liquid streams – and the contrasting lakes of damnation, or, the open seas.

If I may, I wish to compare this text to one other passage from the *Christus Patiens*, highlighting a further feature that illustrates my point, or one of my points, that is: Throughout the drama, Jesus is elevated by his mother: her glorious son, her impeccable son, the weight of the world he carries – the fact that it is his mother doing his praising should be a warning. The dramatist also *twice removes* the speech above from the Teacher, as it is supposedly spoken by “some angel or mortal” and it is reported by a messenger. Prior to the betrayal and arrest we hear the messenger quote Jesus praying in the most elegant language – and when The Man arrives in person, on scene, an anti-climax. He and his speech is very ordinary. This contrasts the picture portrayed of him and the general high register of the language. There is also a marked difference in his characterisation between the reported speech of “some angel or mortal” before the death of the Teacher and his “live” appearance after his resurrection. This detachment – distance opens room for questions on validity. The haughtiness and pomp ascribed to this “Hero” thus needs to be tested, and in this the Christian doctrine and its Neoplatonic foundations lay exposed: The play in this sense is masterful.

CONCLUSION

The Greek tragedy, the *Christus Patiens* offers an ideal opportunity to study the philosophical shift from its “Greek orientation” (heritage) to its continental, “modern base”, its reckoning with religion and its moulding in various art forms and blunt expression. It seems to assume a premise of disguise, in which it uses the Christian story to communicate Philosophical principles – in relation to natural law. Why would such a disguise be necessary?

This project is escapist: by escaping from the pertinent and essential questions of the day, taking a side view, it hopes to contribute as a freed thinker. Where the study of historical philosophical foundations are often pompous and are intended to elevate the status quo, this study wishes to show they may be more ordinary than usually thought. While questions on the extent of responsibility and the limitations of rights are acute today, answers from the past may be rare, but at least they may shed light on our own involvement therein.